

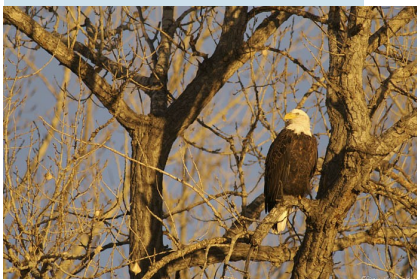


THE TALON

Volunteer newsletter of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge

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Dave Showalter

An adult bald eagle perched in a cottonwood tree on the Refuge.

EVENTS CALENDAR

- Thursday, March 18: Volunteer Meeting, 7pm, Visitor Center. Topic: Habitat Management Plan presented by Terry Wright
- Saturday, April 10: Fishing Frenzy Kid's Derby
- Thursday, April 15: Volunteer Appreciation Event
- Sunday, July 4: Wild Walk
- Volunteer Appreciation Event-Embassy Suites

Bald Eagles on the Rocky Mountain Arsenal By Dave Rhodes, USFWS Volunteer

Imagine you are a contractor working to clean up the Rocky Mountain Arsenal superfund site. You look up in the cottonwood trees and see one of the largest raptors in the world. You know it is something special. It is the bald eagle, America's most celebrated bird of prey. Its large size, white head and tail, fierce eyes and beak, sharp talons and threatening shriek warn you to respect this bird's space. They can see a rabbit two miles away and can distinguish their mate at a distance of up to 40 miles. This is a bird that commands respect.

At one time (1986) the bald eagle was on the endangered species list. DDT ingestion had caused the eagle to produce eggs that were too thin to support the weight of the adult sitting on the nest. Many eggs were lost before hatching.

But thanks to valiant environmental efforts, bald eagles have made a comeback, to include those at Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR.

Bald eagles usually arrive at the Refuge in early November and stay until early April. They form a winter communal roost that hosts as many as 82 eagles on a single night (1998). Communal roosts are gathering sites used primarily at night. The roost provides a safe and relatively protected resting spot that gives immature eagles a chance to learn where to hunt. Communal roosts are not far from hunting areas such as lakes (Derby, Ladora), rivers

(South Platte), and prairie dog towns. Additionally, several communal roosts exist in the Denver metro area.

A bald eagle nest is usually near the top of a tall tree, often a cottonwood. The immense pile of sticks is lined with grasses, mosses and twigs. The nest is added to and re-used year after year. It can be as large as eight feet across and twelve feet deep.

More than eight months are needed for a pair of bald eagles to raise their young. In November, a bald eagle pair begins its elaborate courtship ritual, including tumbling in the air and nest building. This goes on until February when egg laying takes place, lasting three to five days. The adults become very territorial and will defend the nest area during this precarious time. They will drive off any other adults visiting the Refuge.

Incubation lasts 35 days with hatching occurring in late March. The young eaglets spend the next ten weeks in the nest being fed by the parents, growing feathers and gathering strength. Feeding the nestlings takes tremendous effort. Five or six items of prey are delivered to the nest each day!

May is a critical time in the eaglets' life. They are taught how to feed themselves and how to fly. The month of June brings another milestone for the young as they must fledge from the nest. During the summer, eagles are rarely seen because they are tending the nest, feeding any young, and teaching life-

skills. After that, the family (adults and immatures) scatter from the nest site and spend the remainder of the year along the Front Range.

Although the nesting pair may disperse from the active nest site, they stay around the Refuge and surrounding area year round. During the winter, they can often be seen on the frozen lakes scavenging on dead fish or waterfowl. Sometimes they feed on prairie dogs which they would rather pirate from other predators such as ferruginous or red-tailed hawks. In winter, Colorado's population of bald eagles soars. Winter counts have ranged anywhere from 400 to 700 eagles. Thus winter is the best time to see large numbers of bald eagles at the Refuge.

Bald eagle fledglings from the Refuge head to the South Platte River to learn to compete for food. Juvenile birds may migrate south where hunting is easier. In November, eagles from the northern Rockies (Montana, Alberta) arrive to spend the winter. If the young Refuge eagles have stayed in the area they join this group. When the northern eagles disperse in the spring, our immature eagles leave with them. Once the young eagles become mature (four to six years old), they begin the nesting cycle themselves, seeking a mate and a nesting site. First-time nesting pairs will often return to the area from which they were fledged. And if they do, they will have to contend with their par-

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SEASONAL FOOTPRINTS

Seasonal information about wildlife species at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge.

- January: Christmas Bird Count Results (January 1, 2010): 52 species and 13,082 individual birds counted. Highlights include long-eared owl & rough-legged hawk sightings.
- January: Peak bald eagle roost count was 31 individuals on January 1, 2010.
- January: Bald eagles begin to leave the Refuge for breeding areas north along the Montana-Canada border.
- January & February: Deer shed their antlers.
- February: Great horned owls are nesting (one of the earliest) in large, visible nests.
- February: Prairie dogs breed.
- March: Swainson's hawks arrive after a 6,000 mile journey from wintering grounds in Argentina.
- Late March: Burrowing owls begin to return from Texas & Mexico.
- March: Mountain bluebirds can be seen perched on fences and mullein stalks as they pass through on their way to nesting areas in higher elevations.

-Dave Rhodes, USFWS Volunteer

Refuge Ramblings By Ron Hellbusch, Talon Editor

The National Wildlife Refuge Association (NWRA) represents the 550+ refuges nation-wide as well as the nearly 300 friends and volunteer groups. Their mission is to get local refuge stories in front of Congress, seeking badly needed funding to operate and maintain our national wildlife refuge system, and providing education, training and resources for refuge managers and staff as well as friends groups and volunteers.

We see the work of NWRA here at home in Colorado with their support to Refuge Manager, Steve Berendzen, staff, volunteers and the friends group in our call for stimulus funds for the new Refuge Visitor Center. This Washington DC based advocacy team is essential to the national wildlife refuge system in competing for other governmental departments and agencies for Federal funding.

NWRA played an influential role in securing \$200 million for

national refuge conservation programs this past fiscal year. They sought \$1 million for volunteers to battle invasive species on refuges. The association succeeded in having an environmental impact statement required on the Alaska "Road to Nowhere." In addition, the association hosted a conference in Washington, DC, attracting over 500 refuge volunteers and friends group members to meet with Congressional leaders. NWRA formulated "partnerships" with other conservation organizations in order to amplify the conservation voice in Congress. They produce reports and research in support of refuge volunteer initiated programs, refuge funding, friends group services and current Federal legislation and policies that impact the national wildlife refuge system.

WA Congressman Norm Dicks, chair of the House Interior Appropriations Commit-

tee, voiced the value of NWRA when he said "NWRA and its affiliated friends groups and volunteers are indispensable to alerting Congress to the needs of our national wildlife refuges."

Learn more about NWRA by visiting their website at www.refugeassociation.org or share your thoughts and our refuge needs with President Evan Hirsche, whose contact information can be found on the website.



Dave Showalter

Adult male mule deer in rut at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge.

News from the Refuge Manager: Update on the New Visitor Center By Ron Hellbusch, Talon Editor

Excitement abounds at Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge as construction bids for the new Visitor Center are set to begin in March.

The location of the new Visitor Center will have wide ranging visibility on a high plateau in the southwest corner of the Refuge, adjacent to the Dick's Sporting Goods Park. Access will be from 64th Avenue to Prairie Parkway and then north on Prairie Gateway Road or from 56th Avenue to the Refuge entrance. "Final design was completed in mid-December with a three month bid package being developed to allow for the taking of sealed bids in early March" Refuge Manager Steve

Berendzen reported. Ground-breaking is tentatively planned for early to mid-May. "Construction could take approximately 12 months, with plans for a grand opening of the new facility in the summer of 2011," Berendzen stated.

Visitor Services Manager, Sherry James, described the features of the new Visitor Center as focusing around a unique exhibit area on the main floor entrance. James proudly asserted, "The focal exhibit in the lobby will be a bison bull that should "wow" visitors regardless of age and most likely will be a photo stop."

The facility will embrace the "Prairie to Prairie" exhibit theme. "This theme will ac-

quaint visitors with the native short grass prairie, its landscape, plant life, wildlife and artifacts of the 1800s and early 1900s, the homesteaders that made their living off the land, the war and chemical weapons manufacturing years, cleanup, and long term care of the site", James stated. The exhibits will take visitors through the 20th century time period into today's national wildlife refuge, which was designated by Congress in 1992. The various land uses during World War II and cold war period have in recent decades been transformed and restored back to the prairie of the previous century.

Hand-held sound wands will allow visitors to hear sounds

and voices of the prairie past along with narratives of how life existed in that era. Visitors will see mounted wildlife, and children can play dress-up with historical prairie clothing. They will also learn how the vision was fulfilled in becoming a national wildlife refuge through the transfer of the land to the Service, the discovery of bald eagles, and how the restoration occurred. Wall panels will visibly showcase what the long-term future of the Refuge will be for landscape, water, wildlife and the public.

"In addition, the Visitor Center also will feature an administrative wing, auditorium and class rooms for Refuge programs, guest speakers and public involvement"

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Happy 2010! By Sherry James, Visitor Services Manager

I can't believe we're already out of 2009 and in to 2010. What a year we've had at the Refuge, and at the risk of sounding like a broken record, we couldn't have done it all without YOU - our awesome volunteers! In 2009, you all contributed a whopping 6,445 hours of service! I get goose bumps just thinking about all of the blood, sweat, and tears you have shed through your volunteering for the good of land, critters and people. So, are you ready to do it again in '10? We hope to see you all back doing the things you do in the new year, no matter how small or how big. It all makes a huge difference.

I'll come down from my soapbox and get down to some Visitor Services business. There is a lot to get excited about this year, so I've outlined some of these things below.

The New Visitor Center – Progress continues with the planning and design of the building and the exhibits. We anticipate

that the bid package will be issued in March with groundbreaking expected sometime in May 2010. There will also be a groundbreaking ceremony planned, so more to come on that.

New Trails – We have received funding to construct a floating boardwalk across the arm of Lake Ladora. That project should start sometime this spring. We will also cut in a connector trail at both ends of the boardwalk so visitors can walk completely around the lake without walking on roads. A trail that connects the new visitor center with the current facility is already in place, except for connecting within the construction footprint of the new building. We may also squeak out a little planning to re-construct the Locust Loop Trail just north of the current Visitor Center.

Expanded Drop-in Program – The Refuge is now open to visitors on Thursdays in addition to Saturdays, Sundays, Tuesdays, and Wednesdays. We have

already scheduled a few nature programs on Thursday, but for the time being, no wildlife tours.

New Refuge Brochure - You should be seeing a new Refuge brochure hot-off-the-press later this summer. This brochure will take us to 2016 (I hope!).

Refuge Special Events – We are planning for Fishing Frenzy, Wild Walk, and Refuge Roundup – all of which we will need your help and support, so get your poles, hiking boots, and spurs ready!

Bison Round-up – We are all looking forward to our first round-up to be held. The corral should be finished by fall 2010 and soon after we could be rounding up the bison. Some of you may be interested in participating?

Friends of the Front Range Wildlife Refuges – The Service is excited to be involved with further development of our friends group with the expansion of their membership and board. Brainstorming has be-

gun for special programs and opportunities for engaging with you and visitors. As plans become more concrete, we'll let you know. In the meantime, please lend your support in any way you can.

This is just a short list of the things we are working on, and as you all know, many other projects and programs will pop-up through the year that will require help from our volunteers. If you have ideas, suggestions or comments, please let us know. The Visitor Services staff will work hard to make sure you have adequate training and the tools necessary to perform your tasks, but most of all, we want you to have fun and enjoy yourselves!

FEATURED PLANT

Indian Ricegrass

Indian Ricegrass (*Achnatherum hymenoides*) is a member of the grass family (perennial, cool-season) and an important component of the Arsenal's habitat restoration. *A. hymenoides* is well adapted to sandy soils and an ideal candidate for preventing wind erosion. This is a tough grass, well-known for its ability to reseed and propagate on overgrazed or fire-damaged lands. Historically, Native Americans used this grass as a rice-like food. The seeds were parched and either ground into a meal for bread or eaten as porridge.

Field Identification: In early spring, look for a bunchgrass (1-2.5' tall) with tightly rolled leaves. The open, multi-branched inflorescence begins emerging in late spring. Each

branch ends in a single seed that is covered in short, black hairs. *A. hymenoides* is likely to be found in areas with sagebrush.

-Lisa Brashear,
USFWS Biological
Science Technician

Bald Eagles at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal

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ents who may defend the area around the original nest site.

The bald eagle nest on the Refuge is one of more than 50 nesting sites in Colorado. In the Denver area, nests are usually in trees near reservoirs (Barr Lake, Standley Lake), or rivers. Human presence often creates stress for nesting bald eagles, thus nesting persists in protected areas. The U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service has been studying the bald eagle on the Refuge for about 30 years. Since 2002, a pair of bald eagles has nested in the cottonwoods along First Creek on the Refuge

consistently. The pair has successfully fledged one or two eaglets every year since that time.



Dave Showalter

Two bald eagles on the Refuge.

News from the Refuge Manager

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added James. The elevated site and strategic location of the Visitor Center will allow guests to have a panoramic view of the Refuge. It won't be long now before everyone sees all the waiting and planning become a reality.



Fred Krampetz, Former USFWS Staff

Staff Profile: Lisa Goncalves

Hello all! My name is Lisa Goncalves and I am the new Park Ranger here at Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR. I moved here in December from Baltimore, MD where I worked at Patuxent Research Refuge. My time spent at Patuxent dealt with trails, scouts, environmental education, and interpretation. While we did not have mustard or nerve gas use we did have unexploded ordnance on the refuge from the past when the land was a military training ground.

I started out my permanent career with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service in Rhode Island at Ninigret NWR. There I ran a visitor center, was the environ-

mental education coordinator, and planned special events. My job duties here at Rocky Mountain Arsenal NWR will be fishing, trails, scouts, and some special events.

I am originally an Army Brat so home is wherever my parents end up. That is currently Texas so coming to Denver is almost like coming home! The yummy Mexican food and endless breweries might have added a little sunshine to Colorful Colorado. I can't wait to see what spring and summer weather is like here as I am repeatedly told that this crazy winter weather is not normal. But I cannot complain when every day I can look out my window and see the

beautiful Rocky Mountains.

I would like to thank everyone I have met so far at the Arsenal and for making me feel so welcome. I look forward to meeting the rest of the RMA family!



HELP WANTED

We are looking for someone to feed, maintain, and care for us! We live in tanks and aquariums in the Wildlife Learning Lab. Are you that someone? If so, please call our human friend, Lisa goncalves, at 303-289-0417.

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This newsletter is distributed to USFWS staff, Refuge volunteers, and Friends of The Front Range Wildlife Refuges members. We encourage staff, volunteers, and Friends Group members to submit articles and story ideas. Please send articles and ideas as well as any comments or suggestions to:

Ron Hellbusch, Talon Editor
303-438-0482
303-594-1203 (cell)
Ron-hellbusch@comcast.net

Or

Lindsey Messinger, USFWS Staff
303-289-0898 (office)
Lindsey_Messinger@fws.gov

Visit the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge Website at:

<http://www.fws.gov/rockymountainarsenal/>

Sharing the Wildlife Refuge Story

The Refuge staff and Friends Group created a PowerPoint/color slide program describing the resources of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal National Wildlife Refuge and the newly designated Rocky Flats National Wildlife Refuge to include the educational, environmental, and conservation programs.

The PowerPoint program was a collaborative effort by Refuge Manager Steve Berendzen, Deputy Refuge Manager Bruce Hastings and Ron Hellbusch, Past President of the friends group. The Refuge PowerPoint is an ideal avenue to introduce the community and citizens to the two local Refuges. Six presentations have already been made in Commerce City, Brighton and Westminster, and each was very well received.

The PowerPoint is suitable for community groups, civic clubs, youth groups, senior citizens, church groups, local governments, schools, chambers of commerce or any community group.

Everyone is encouraged to seek out opportunities to tell the Refuge story within our north area through the new PowerPoint program.

Please call Bruce Hastings at 303-289-0533 or Ron Hellbusch at 303-438-0482 to schedule the PowerPoint program with organizations seeking programs.